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ABSTRACT

Research findings on identification of factors associated with increasing response rates to mailed questionnaires are presented. Several tactics which have been used to effect a greater response rate are presented and explained. Physical factors, such as typed correspondence, have been shown to yield higher response rates than duplicated correspondence. Pre-questionnaire contact, such as a telephone call to inform subjects that they will be receiving a questionnaire, is effective. Use of a personalized cover letter has proven to be an essential and effective response-soliciting method. Monetary inducements initiate increases in response rates as do mailing procedures, such as using stamps on reply envelopes. Follow-up procedures are effective in increasing response rate. A compilation of additional suggestions offered by the authors cited in the literature review is included. (DWH)

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Tactics and Factors that Increase Response Rates to Mailed Questionnaires

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by

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Introduction

Any value derived from a mailed questionnaire as an investigative method of research is dependent on the amount of response generated. Regardless of the quality, validity, and reliability of the constructed instrument, poor response can dictate the subsequent demise of an otherwise brilliant supposition.

What, then, can be done to alleviate this low response problem for an investigator who has given time, money, and effort for this research procedure? Several studies have been conducted to identify factors associated with increasing response rates. This paper presents research findings on those factors and tactics that play a part in increasing response rates. Specific questions that will be addressed include the following:

> What considerations should be given to physical factors in designing the questionnaire?
>
> What class of mailing is most effective in stimulating responses?
>
> How effective are monetary incentives to increasing response rates?
>
> What are successful follow-up procedures?
>
> What are some general rules to follow to increase response?

Methods used to locate the information presented here included the use of the card catalog, Current Index of Journals in Education (CIJE), and the magazine periodical files. The descriptive terms "questionnaires," "surveys," "attitudes," and "mailings" were looked up in the card catalog in an effort to locate books on the subject. These same descriptors were used to locate abstracts of journal articles in CIJE Index.

The review of the literature was limited to factors that increase mail response rates. Problems experienced in conducting the research included repetition of the findings by many different authors. Perhaps the findings can be considered as truths because of the consistency of their appearance in the studies. Several of the sources reporting data were quite dated. This fact may serve as evidence and provide the incentive for further writing and research on this topic.

The major obstacle encountered by investigators using the mailed questionnaire as a research instrument is low response rate. Several studies have been conducted that were designed to identify and increase response producing factors. The following variables are presented in an effort to identify and report on tactics that have been used to effect a greater response rate.

Physical factors

Typed correspondence has been shown to yield higher response rates than duplicated correspondence. Photo-offset printing produces a professional appearance and good response especially when used with high quality paper.[1]

Colored paper and ink have also been shown to increase response rates. Recommended color combinations are black ink on white paper, grass green ink on white paper, lustre blue ink on white paper, and black ink on yellow paper.[2] Ford found that the size of the paper was not a factor in stimulating response when he compared the results of a survey printed on legal size paper with the results of one that was a folder type.[3]

Pre-questionnaire contact

Waisaner suggested that the use of a phone call to inform subjects that they will be receiving a questionnaire increases response rates. Eckland found that methods including the use of phone calls produced a response rate of 94 per cent in a study of college dropouts.[4]

While the use of pre-letters is considered a courtesy informing the subject of the purpose of the questionnaire and that his time will be requested, there are mixed feelings pertaining to the utility of pre-letters for increasing response rates.[5] Parsons and Medford contended that money spent for pre-letters could be better used to increase sample size or construct more elaborate follow-ups.[6] Skipper and Ellison found that face-to-face pre-questionnaire contact was an effective alternative to pre-letters in a hospital study.[7]

Cover letters and personalization

Using a cover letter has proven to be an essential and effective response soliciting method. Simon concluded that cover letters that were personally typed received more response than one that was mimeographed.[8] The cover letter should state the purpose and be short and to the point. The use of a hand-written signature was found by Linskey to have significant effect in increasing response rates.[9] Frazier concluded that a personal hand-written postscript on the cover letter asking for a prompt response also significantly increased response rates.[10]

Personalization of cover letters has been shown to increase response rates. The use of nicknames and letters signed by a faculty member identified as having the most rapport with the subject were found to be effective by Snelling.[11] Kawash and Alemoni found, however, that a

personal signature on a cover letter had little effect on the initial rate of response.[12] Weilbacher and Walsh found this to be true, also, in their study of fraternity alumni.[13]

Monetary inducements

Inducements are another factor in initiating increases in response rates. Money and prizes appear to be the major offerings. Knox suggests that persons considering the use of the prizes as incentives should check the legality of such procedures with postal authorities.[14]

Crowley found that results of a New York City public high school teachers' study indicated paying subjects money may have a positive effect in motivating cooperation and completion of a questionnaire.[15] Kephart and Bressler found that including a quarter with a questionnaire increased response rates. Pennies, nickels, and dimes did not produce a similar effect when included in this study.[16] Newman found that a dollar included with a questionnaire produced higher response rates than a quarter, which was more effective, however, than no monetary incentive.[17] Wortuba compared the effectiveness of a quarter sent with the questionnaire, the promise of fifty cents for returning a completed questionnaire, and no monetary inducement at all. The quarter incentive was found to be the most effective and economically efficient of the three.[18]

Mailing procedures

The use of stamps is also a factor in stimulating response rate. Hammond found that the use of postage stamps on return envelopes stimulated higher response rates than the use of business reply envelopes not requiring a stamp.[19] Champion and Sear found that postage stamps

elicit a higher response rate than metered postage.[20] Martin and McConnel found that the use of commemorative stamps was more effective than business-reply franked envelopes.[21] Mayer agreed that commemorative stamps may increase return mail, but usually only if used immediately after their original issuance.[22]

The class of mailings also have an effect on response rates. Gullahorn and Gullahorn found that questionnaires sent by first-class mail were completed and returned at a higher rate than questionnaires sent by third-class mail.[23] Clausen and Ford found that the use of special delivery letters had a significant effect on response rates.[24]

Follow-up Procedures

Post-cards were deemed by Keen as an effective, yet inexpensive, follow-up method of increasing questionnaire returns.[25] Nichols and Meyers found that a post-card follow-up mailed three days after the original questionnaire was the single most effective follow-up device in a study of college students.[26]

There are several factors and tactics that have been identified as influencing response rates to mailed questionnaires. These factors include neatness, the color and quality of ink and paper, reproduction procedures, class mailings, stamps, monetary incentives, pre-letters, cover letters, phone calls, and follow-up procedures.

The most effective questionnaires found to increase response rates were those that had been reproduced using the offset-printing method with high quality green or white paper and black, green, or lustre blue ink. The questionnaire had been preceded by a telephone call or letter informing the subject of the need for his time in responding to the

survey. A personally signed cover letter accompanied the questionnaire and explained the purpose and reiterated the value of a response from the subject. A hand-written note appeared at the bottom of the instrument asking the subject to respond as soon as possible.

The research-perfect questionnaire and cover letter were then placed in a hand-addressed envelope enclosed with a twenty-five cent monetary incentive, which has been shown as the highest response producing inducement. The envelope was addressed to the respondent at the place where he would most likely have the time and inclination to fill it out. A self-addressed, individually postage stamped envelope was enclosed. The questionnaire was then sent using an individual first-class stamp.

Three days after the questionnaire had been sent, a follow-up letter was sent that thanked the subjects for their participation and reminded them of the need for their response. A second copy of the questionnaire was included. A post-card was sent one week after the first mailing. If a response was not experienced after this, a phone call was made asking for a response.

General rules to follow to increase response

Because of the numerous factors involved in eliciting higher response rates to mailed questionnaires, guidelines need to be established to assist the investigator in deciding which methods to employ when using the questionnaire method of inquiry. The following list is a compilation of suggestions offered by the authors cited in the literature review. If these suggestions are followed, a higher rate of response rates to mailed questionnaires should occur.

(1) Know the characteristics of the sample population. Be sure that respondents are capable of responding and are knowledgeable of the subject matter.

(2) Establish a relationship of trust with the respondents through a pre-letter. Explain the purpose of the questionnaire and assure them of the anonymity and confidentiality of their response. Repeat this asurance in the cover letter.

(3) Produce the questionnaires neatly and professionally on a high quality paper giving consideration to the colors of ink and paper.

(4) Offer the respondents a copy of a study's results in return for their cooperation.

(5) Include a stamped, self-addressed envelope for the subject's convenience.

(6) Establish a deadline and include the expression, "Please complete immediately."

(7) Use special delivery and certified mail for reminders and follow-ups, if affordable. Consider first the trouble the respondent might have in order to collect letters.

(8) Hand address envelopes rather than type them.

(9) Use stamps rather than metered postage.

(10) Send questionnaires to subjects' homes or office, depending on where the subjects would most likely have the time to fill in responses.

(11) Send a well designed follow-up--thank you reminder three days after the original questionnaire has been sent.

(12) Obtain impressive sponsorship to enhance the importance of the need for the subject to respond.

(13) Include another copy of the questionnaire with the second follow-up.

(14) Formal letters, humorous pleas , post-cards, and telephone calls may be used for additional follow-up.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Larry Leslie, "Increasing Response Rates To Long Questionnaires," The Journal of Educational Research, 63, No. 8 (1970), 347-350.

[2] Donald Paterson and Miles Tinker, How to Make Type Readable. (New York: Harper & Brothers., 1940), p. 209.

[3] Neil Ford, "Questionnaire Appearance and Response Rates In Mail Surveys," Journal of Advertising Research, 8, No. 3 (1968) 43-45.

[4] Bruce Eckland, "Effects Of Prodding To Increase Mail-back Returns." Journal of Applied Psychology, 49, No. 3 (1965) 165-169.

[5] Douglas Berdie and John Anderson. Questionnaires: Design and Use. (Methuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1974), p. 57.

[6] Robert Parsons and Thomas Medford, "The Effect Of Advance Notice In Mail Surveys Of Homogenous Groups," Public Opinion Quarterly, 36, No. 2 (1972), 258-259.

[7] James Skipper and Margaret Ellison, "Personal Contact As A Technique For Increasing Questionnaire Returns From Hospitalized Patients After Discharge," Journal of Health and Human Behavior, 7, No. 3 (1966), 211-214.

[8] Raymond Simon, "Responses To Personal And Form Letters In Mail Surveys," Journal of Advertising Research, 7, No. 1 (1967), 28-30.

[9] Arnold Linskey, "A Factorial Experimentation In Inducing Responses To A Mail Questionnaire," Sociology and Social Research, 49, No. 2, (1965), 183-189.

[10] George Frazier and Kermit Bird, "Increasing The Response Of A Mail Questionnaire," Journal of Marketing, 23, No. 2 (1958), 186-187.

[11] W. Rodman Snelling, "The Impact Of A Personalized Mail Questionnaire," The Journal of Educational Research, 63, No. 3 (1969), 126-129.

[12] Mary Kawash and Lawrence Aleamoni, "Effect of Personal Signature On The Initial Rate Of Return Of A Mailed Questionnaire," Journal of Applied Psychology, 55, No. 6 (1971), 589-592.

[13] William Weilbacher and H. R. Walsh, "Mail Questionnaires And The Personalized Letter Of Transmittal," Journal of Marketing, 16, No. 3 (1952), 331-336.

[14] John Knox, "Maximizing Responses To Mail Questionnaires: A New Technique," Public Opinion Quarterly, 15, No. 2 (1951), 366-367.

[15] Francis Crowley, "Compensation Of Subjects For Participation In Research," School and Society, 87, No. 2160 (1959), 430-31.

[16] William Kephart and Marvin Bressler, "Increasing The Responses To Mail Questionnaires: A Research Study," Public Opinion Quarterly, 22, No. 2 (1958), 123-132.

[17] Wheldon Newman, "Differences Between Early And Late Respondents To A Mailed Survey," Journal of Advertising Research, 2, No. 2 (1962), 37-39.

[18] Thomas Wotruba, "Monetary Inducement And Mail Questionnaire Response," Journal of Marketing Research, 3 No. 4 (1966), 398-400.

[19] E. C. Hammond, "Inhalation In Relation To Type And Amount Of Smoking," Journal of the American Statistical Association, 54, No. 285 (1959), 35-51.

[20] Dean Champion and Alan Sear, "Questionnaire Response Rate: A Methodological Analysis," Social Forces, 47, No. 3 (1969), 335-339.

[21] David Martin and John McConnell, "Mail Questionnaire Response Induction: The Effect Of Four Variables On the Response Of A Random Sample To A Difficult Questionnaire," Social Science Quarterly, 41, No. 2 (1970), 409-414.

[22] E. N. Mayer, "Postage Stamps Do Affect Results Of Your Mailing," Printer's Ink, 217, No. 1 (1946), 91.

[23] Jeanne Gullahorn and John Gullahorn, "An Investigation Of The Effects Of Three Factors On Response To Mail Questionnaires," Public Opinion Quarterly, 27, No. 2 (1963), 294-296.

[24] J. A. Clausen and Robert Ford, "Controlling Bias In Mail Questionnaires," Journal of the American Statistical Association, 42, No. 240 (1947), 497-511.

[25] John G. Keane, "Low Cost, High Return Mail Surveys," Journal Of Advertising Research, 3, No. 3 (1963), 28-30.

[26] Robert Nichols and Mary Meyers, "Timing Postcard Follow-ups In Mail Questionnaire Surveys," Public Opinion Quarterly, 30 No. 2 (1966), 306-307.

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